The Year 2003 in Review

Associate Director Soukup (middle row, second from right) and senior staff of the Natural Resource Stewardship and Science (NRSS) Directorate convened in Zion National Park, Utah, in summer 2003 where Water Resources Division chief Dan Kimball (in uniform) was serving as acting park superintendent. The senior staff are (front row, left to right): Jake Hoogland (chief, Environmental Quality Division), Chris Shaver (chief, Air Resources Division), Dan Kimball; (middle row, left to right): Chuck Pettee (acting chief, Water Resources Division), Rich Gregory (chief, Natural Resource Information Division), Mike Soukup, Dave Shaver (chief, Geologic Resources Division); (back row, left to right): Loyal Mehrhoff (chief, Biological Resource Management Division), Abby Miller (deputy associate director, NRSS), and James Gramann (visiting chief social scientist).

National parks: A legacy of intergenerational commitment

by Michael Soukup

"[National] parklands are more than physical resources. They are the delicate strands of nature and culture that bond generation to generation."

—George B. Hartzog, Jr.
Battling for the National Parks

NATIONAL PARKS are intergenerational commitments for the common good, with each generation conserving these magnificent places through restraints placed on their uses. This ethic of stewardship depends upon each generation developing a meaningful relationship with parks that translates to public support. Only with support for a commitment to parks will the character of our nation's most important places remain *intact* and the visitors' experience of our nation's heritage remain undiminished. This commitment can never be broken if our natural and cultural heritage is to be preserved for our citizens to enjoy for all time. Nothing less will pass the parks along unimpaired. Each *Year in Review* documents the year's events, the National Park Service's achievements and setbacks, and their effect on this commitment.

Although not the primary reason why national parks are set aside, economics reflects the wisdom of national park creation and preservation. Public investment in the National Park System produces significant economic benefits for neighboring communities and surrounding regions. In 2001, the latest year for which figures are available, this investment totaled $1.8 billion, including congressional appropriations for operation of the National Park System, construction, the U.S. Park Police, and one-half of the land acquisition budget. According to studies conducted this year by Michigan State University for the National Park Service, the return on this investment from

visitor spending within a day's travel of parks amounted to $10.6 billion, a yield of more than 400%.

A very positive event this year was the convening of a science committee in January by the National Park System Advisory Board. Director Mainella asked this committee to evaluate the Natural Resource Challenge and make recommendations on the future of science in national parks. The interest, time commitment, and dedication of Drs. Sylvia Earle (National Geographic Society), Shirley Malcolm (American Association for the Advancement of Science), Peter Raven (Missouri Botanical Garden), E. O. Wilson (Harvard University), Gary Paul Nabhan (Northern Arizona University), and Larry Madin (Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution) were positive demonstrations that top scientists strongly believe that national parks have an important role to play in the future environmental health of the nation, and perhaps the planet. Their report, formulated with the benefit of the land manager perspective from former Superintendent (and now Board Member) Bob Chandler, is forthcoming in spring 2004 and is something to look forward to.

An event that stands out for me this year occurred at the George Wright Society's biennial meeting in San Diego. Alan Latourelle (CEO of Parks Canada) discussed his country's plan for doubling the size of their National Park System. He said that his generation of Canadians may be the last who would be able to make a commitment to fashion a national park system that fully represents their nation's natural heritage. That reality should raise a question for us: Is our National Park System fully representative of our national heritage? If not, is there time and will to act?

At this meeting and also at the World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa (in August)—the congress in itself is an event of the decade—the three directors of the North American park systems met to discuss common issues and new ways of working together.

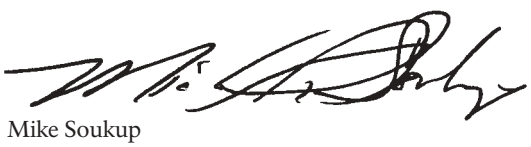
Whereas the calendar year began with a substantial investment of new funding from the Natural Resource Challenge, it closed with economic, security, and other national concerns, reducing *slightly* in the FY 2004 budget the priority previously accorded this initiative. We have had great success in the last few years in tackling these problems through a number of programs collectively called the Natural Resource Challenge. The Challenge has provided science for parks. It also has provided for "parks for science" programs (research learning centers, Sabbaticals in the Parks, Internet-based research permit applications) that make parks better places for the pursuit of science. Many new Challenge-funded programs are blossoming into institutions that are transforming the National Park Service and the national parks (see page 15), including Exotic Plant Management Teams, research learning centers, Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units, and others. However, the most critical Challenge element will be the system of 32 networks of park units that will constitute the first cohesive effort to measure management performance in protecting park resources. Of the eight monitoring networks proposed for funding in FY 2004, three networks—the Arctic, Southeast Coast, and Upper Columbia Basin Networks, serving 30 parks—were left unfunded (leaving a total of 10 unfunded networks) (see map, page 34). So far only about 70% of the critical Natural Resource Challenge information infrastructure (i.e., monitoring networks) is funded after five years, the original target completion date of the Challenge. Law enforcement, U.S. border safety issues, and maintenance of park buildings and roads are competing and pressing priorities.

While it is easy to demonstrate that park facilities require billions of dollars to maintain, the urgency of investment needs and immediately tangible outcomes for natural resources is more difficult to appreciate. When landscapes were less dominated by human activities, less investment may have been necessary. However, today's parks must be actively managed to control the influx of nonnative plants and animals, the incursion of polluted air and water, and the loss of species as parks become isolated islands of habitat. For these reasons active investment in scientists and project support will be necessary to maintain the nation's commitment to its heritage.

Our national parks saw a number of very positive events in 2003, many of which are reported here in the *Year in Review*. They include the breeding success of California condors in Grand Canyon National Park (see page 83), the recovery of nesting waterbirds since the removal of black rats from Anacapa Island (Channel Islands National Park; see page 74), and the dedication of the new research learning center at Rocky Mountain National Park (see page 22).

Other events for 2003 have potentially important, but not as promising, implications for the future of national parks. These include the well-publicized grizzly bear attack on two frequent park visitors at Katmai National Park, numerous outbreaks of fire in natural areas that have been managed unwisely for decades (to suppress the natural fires), increased national needs for power plant construction, and the growing water quantity crisis in the West. A graphic illustration of resource management problems that require hands-on management in parks—in this case the need to manage the invasion of exotic species—was the 24-hour-long struggle between a 12-foot Burmese python (pictured on the cover) and a native alligator witnessed by many visitors to Everglades National Park. The presence of Burmese pythons (which are now apparently breeding in the Everglades) is a striking example of the changes being effected in parks by human activities. What changes will this invasive species make in the system and how will native species be affected?

Although the FY 2004 budget produced a range of events and consequences, annual budget increases over the past several years and the momentum they have built for on-the-ground stewardship efforts in parks, especially progress toward vital signs monitoring in the funded networks and in many restoration activities that reclaimed lost ground, were cause for overall optimism. ■



Mike Soukup

mike_soukup@nps.gov
Associate Director, Natural Resource Stewardship and Science, Washington, D.C.